

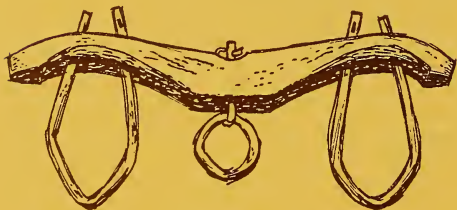
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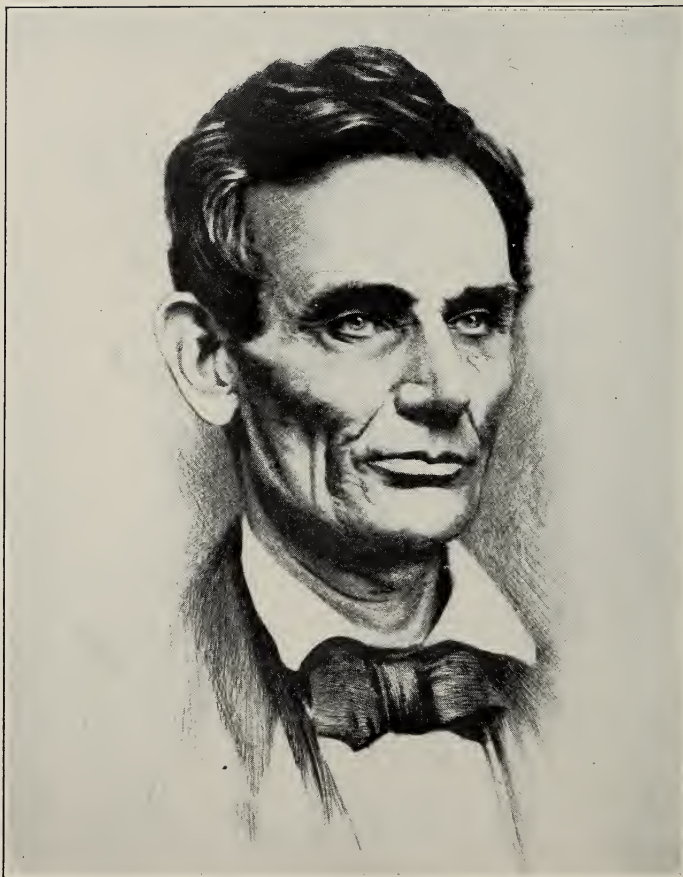
and

HENRIETTA CALHOUN HORNER

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
and
HILLEL'S GOLDEN RULE

By
EMANUEL HERTZ

*(Delivered under the auspices of the United Synagogue over WEA—
February 6, 1929.)*



ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND HILLEL'S GOLDEN RULE

(Delivered under the auspices of the United Synagogue over
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By
EMANUEL HERTZ

IN THE overflow of generalization and praise of Lincoln during the succeeding years, which consists mainly of reiteration of some of the simple facts which constitute the simple story of his early life, and the quotation of a few of his sayings and letters which have become immortal—we begin to forget some of the noblest traits of that remarkable man. One of the qualities of heart which one can see throughout his entire lifetime is his exemplification of what has become the most important of Biblical commandments, or summary of Jewish religion—"Weohavto Lreacho Komocho" **וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ**, to be amended in due time by Hillel's chrystallized Jewish philosophy of life:

דַּע לֶךָ שֶׁנִּי לְחֵבְרֶךָ לֹא תַעֲבִיד — זוּ הִיא כֹּל הַתּוֹרָה כּוּלָּהּ

"What is hateful to thee, do not unto thy fellow man; this is the whole law; the rest is mere commentary", (Shab. 31 a), or as it is today more colloquially put, "Do not unto others what you would not have others do to you—this is the whole law", which he told to the heathen who wished to become a Jew and who asked him for a summary of the Jewish religion in the most concise terms. The impatient or rather impertinent, if not scoffing, student of Judaism—who had, even a few moments before, been unceremoniously ejected from the presence of the impatient Shammai, was thus received with kindness and consideration.

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Lincoln, from his earliest youth until the last moment, ever tried to help to make others happy. Within a few hours of his death—and his last official act was an act of mercy, a pardon, a discharge of an imprisoned Southern soldier—April 14, 1865 is the date—and so occupied was he on that fatal day with conferences and Cabinet meetings, that his secretary wrote the body of the order and he, Lincoln, signed it—with his tired hand, his crushed fingers—for he had been shaking hands with friends and visitors for six full days, and even his extraordinary strength could not cope with a host of well wishers grasping and squeezing the same fingers—and the tired man literally ran away to the theatre—to his doom that night—hesitatingly, it is true, in order to escape the crowd that evening which had not yet shaken his hands. But the signature is in Lincoln's clear handwriting—unmistakable. His last act of mercy was but one of a great number of similar acts—which he was happy to perform—if but permitted by those around him who were ever prating about military discipline, about undermining the morale of the army: shoot, hang, butcher, kill—were torturing sounds to this kindest of men, to this gentlest of souls, to this rarest of spirits. 'Way back in the wilds of Kentucky, in the primeval forests of Indiana, on the prairies of Illinois, did he learn the rudiments of that elemental and eternal philosophy which Hillel pronounced and lived after the Babylonian era of the Jewish people—a people, though deprived of government, of homeland, of all that makes a nation, but which after the nation was scattered and destroyed was preparing in the schools of Urah and Pumpaditha, and was teaching and training an entire people to become the spiritual leaders of all mankind. Dr. John R. Paxton, one of Lincoln's soldier boys—after he became a preacher—aptly says: "Mohammed and all prophets of religion, all priests of science, all doctors of philosophy, all benefactors of mankind must still go to Mount Sinai. They must march past it, salute it, and stand at attention until, from its solemn top, encircled with fire and

smoke, they receive orders for the line of march to the Promised Land. No modern engineering has been able to build a highway for the nations of the earth, that cut off Mount Sinai and left it forgotten, forsaken, out of use. Nay, there is no highway to any Promised Land of civilization or progress, of public welfare and private worth, that does not still run hard by Sinai. Moses survives. Mount Sinai has not ceased to burn, and the decalogue still powerfully affects the destinies of mankind."

Throughout his entire mature life, throughout his twenty years' long argument against slavery, Lincoln is but interpreting and applying Hillel's theory of not doing to others what is hateful to you—all else is but commentary and explanation. "When the white man governs himself and also governs another man, that is more than self-government—that is despotism. If the negro is a man, then my ancient faith teaches me that 'all men are created equal' * * * what I do say is that no man is good enough to govern another man without that other's consent. I say this is the leading principle, the sheet anchor of American Republicanism." I doubt whether Lincoln ever heard of Hillel—or read even in translation anything referring to that great liberal mind—but here is the same principle preached well-nigh two thousand years after they had been taught in Palestine and on the banks of the rivers of Babylon. The book of life which maintained Hillel and his pupils, Shammai and his pupils, and the successive leaders, the high priests, the Nasayim, the Tanayim, the Rabbis, the teachers of Israel, and the study of which enabled them to survive all ordeals—became Lincoln's book. He read it, he studied it, he understood it, he quoted it, it became part of him; when he did not quote he began to reason, to write, to speak—unconsciously as the leaders and as the people of the Book spoke. And as the plain people of the ages always understood the simple statements, the noble char-

acters, the inimitable parables of this Book, so did Lincoln's neighbors, Lincoln's clients, Lincoln's associates—they began to be drawn to the man who spoke this simple language of the Book, who reasoned, pleaded, argued, like the people of the Book, in the style of the Book. It is only after people begin to build the Tower of Babel that they fail to understand, nay, they begin to misunderstand each other. Then the far-sighted begin to build their ark against the impending storm—wherein they can save and preserve the remnant, the perpetuators of the race, the leaders of the future, the lantern bearers of humanity, the ambassadors of God.

Many a time Lincoln found in the prophet's query—

ומה יהוה דורש ממך כי אם עשות משפט
ואהבת חסד והצנע לכה עם אלהיך

“And what does the Lord thy God demand of thee except to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God,”—a complete religious chart for his life. Here, thought Lincoln, was a religion so simple, yet so all-embracing, so attainable, yet so universal, that all could find a religious home under its roof. He was in complete accord with the great lawgiver when he exclaimed on the eve of his ascent to Mount Nebo:

כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום לא נפלת הוא ממך ולא רחקה הוא ; לא בשמים היא לאמר.

מי יעלה לנו השמימה ויקחה לנו וישמענו אתה ונעשנה. ולא מעבר לים הוא לאמר מי יעבר-לנו, אל עבר הים ויקחה לנו וישמענו אתו ונעשנה ; כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו ;

“For this commandment which I command thee this day, is not hidden from thee, nor is it far off.”

“It is not in heaven ; that thou shouldst say, Who will go up for us to heaven, and fetch it unto us, and cause us to hear

it, that we may do it?" "Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldst say, who will go over the sea for it, and fetch it unto us, and cause us to hear it, that we may do it?"

"But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it."

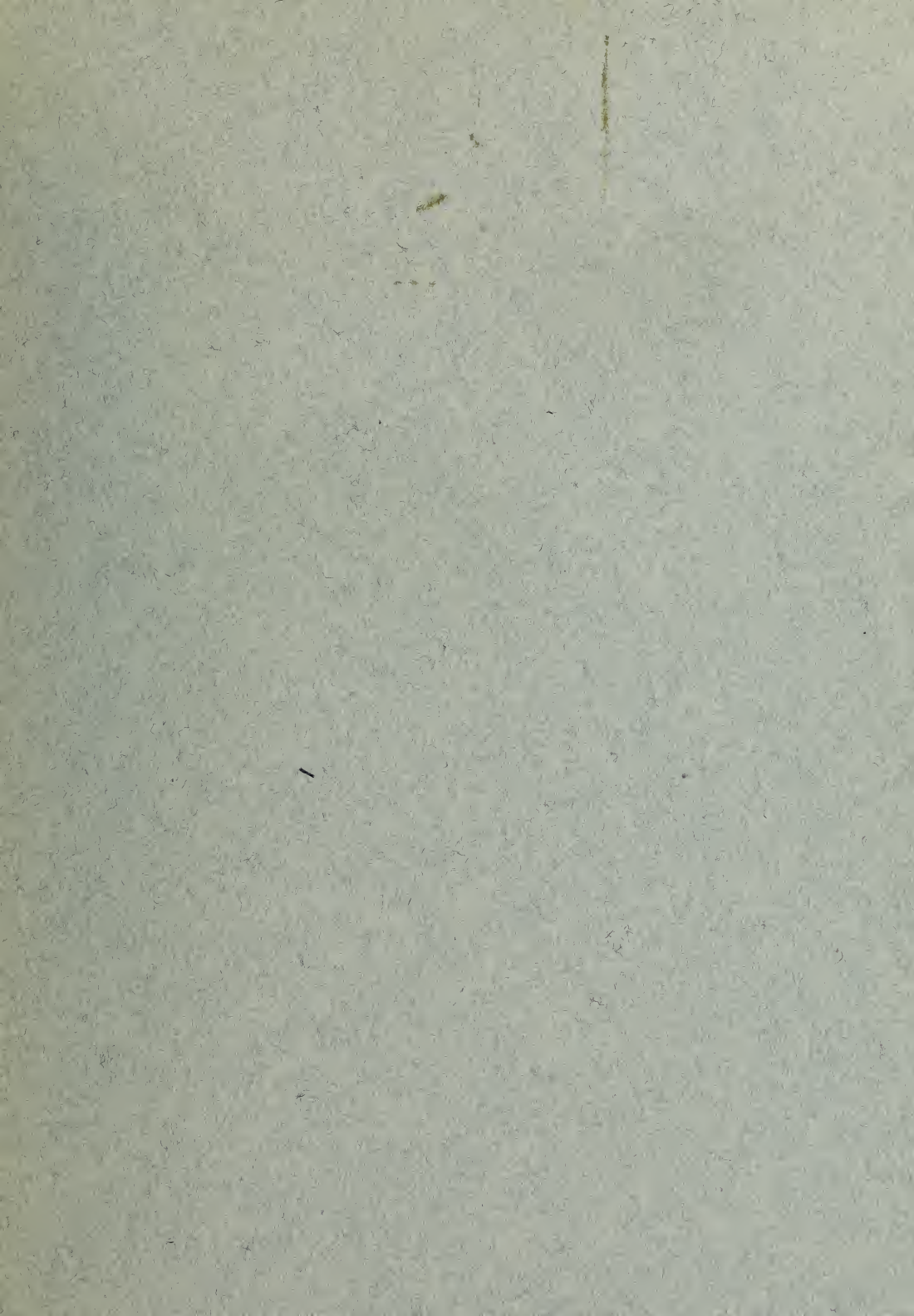
And yet a host of people have been speculating as to whether Lincoln was religious—whether he belonged to this or to that school of religion. A church, a house of worship to him was not essential. They are not always filled with members actuated with the proper spirit—the spirit of God—their walls have not always harbored men of justice and right and humility. Had he not communed with his God, like his great prototype in the Midianitish desert, who reached the ground which was holy before the burning bush by way of the great open spaces, upon the burning sands, under the miriads of stars of an oriental sky, silently following his meek and silent flock? Had not Lincoln lived the same life in the vast wild open spaces of unredeemed primeval America? But this lover of his fellowmen could not refuse or belittle the opinion of those to whom Church and house of worship is all. To them he said: "Build me a house of worship over the entrance of which is written: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and might, and thy neighbor as thyself,'—that church I will join and you may have me as a member."

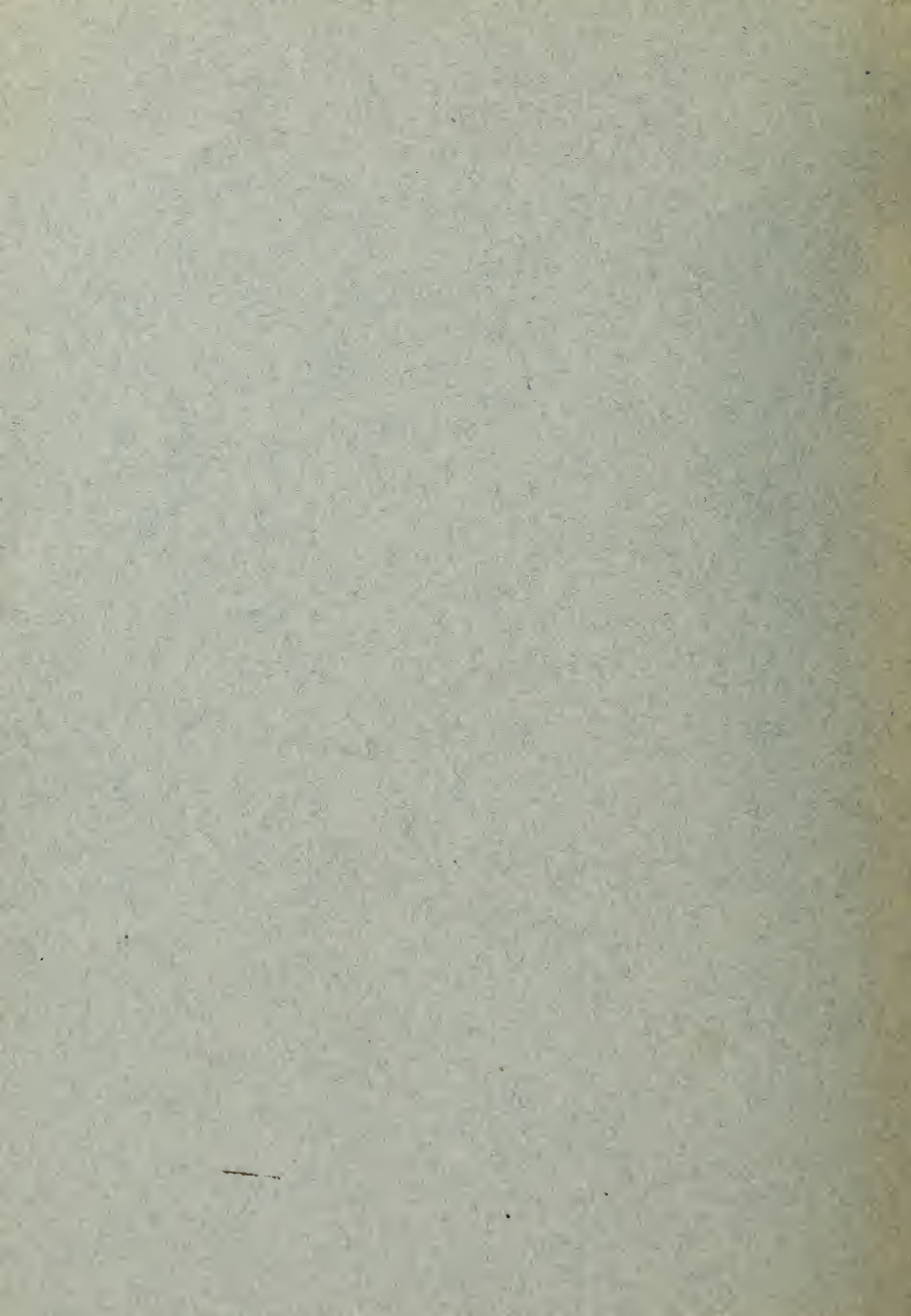
Alas, but that house of worship has not yet been erected, although he asked for it nigh seventy years ago. In vain he pleaded for the equality of man. How often did he point to the Biblical query: "Are we not children of one Father, has not one God created us all?" How often he wailed when he beheld the land of his heart, the country he loved, torn asunder by the basest of all passions—war. And in his agony he would exclaim: "Both read the same Bible, both pray to the same God." And he was commissioned with the task—

greater than the one assigned to Washington—to reunite the embattled and war-weary sections, convince the contending armies that the love of neighbor, love of fellowman in the broadest sense, was the only sentiment, the only truth by which this, his beloved country, could and would survive. His personification of the Golden Rule, of love of neighbor, of love of South, finally prevailed—even as it prevailed with the Clary boys who first doubted him, and with Jack Armstrong, who found in him an honest fighter; even as it prevailed in his many trials, his human causes, as it did prevail in the Legislature which he entered in his youth, even as it prevailed in Congress, as it prevailed during the long preparation for his great travail during his Presidency, even as it did prevail with the soldier, the general, the legislator, the publicist, and even with the Southern portion of the Union, where his ideals began to make converts and thus augment the friends of the Union, to the end that cohesion took the place of separation, Union the place of secession, and one flag in place of a score; one flag, one country, one ideal, one religion in public life—‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’ or ‘What is hateful to thee, do not unto thy fellow man,’—this is one of the echoes from the throne of God which will lead and guide and guard and unite the followers of Lincoln’s emancipated fellow-countrymen for ages to come and for generations yet unborn—so that the slogan of the oriental monarch composed by his wise men at his behest—to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and in all situations—and worded in the sinister statement: “And this too shall pass away,” may not be predicated of his Union of States. “Let us hope, rather,” says Lincoln, “that by the best cultivation of the physical world beneath and around us, and the intellectual and moral world within us, we shall secure an individual, social and political prosperity whose course shall be onward and upward, and which, while the earth endures, shall not pass away.”

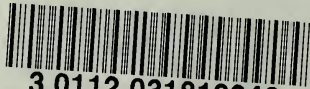








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